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TAGS: PREL PGOV PHUM KJUS PTER ETRD VE CO
SUBJECT: A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS HEATS UP COLOMBIA-VENEZUELA
RELATIONS

REF: BOGOTA 3287; BOGOTA 2449

CLASSIFIED BY: Mark Wells, Political Counselor; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) The GOC is remaining cool in the face of rising bilateral tensions with Venezuela, with President Uribe and Foreign Minister Bermudez publicly calling for calm on November 4. However, observers worry Venezuelan actions reveal an aggressive intent. The GBRV blames alleged Colombian paramilitaries operating in Venezuela for several recent murders along the border and temporarily closed the principal border crossings from northeastern Colombia. Venezuelan officials publicly charge the alleged paramilitary killings form part of a joint GOC-USG conspiracy aimed at destabilizing Chavez and his regime, and have denounced Colombian intelligence officials allegedly operating in Venezuela. Some in the GOC suspect GBRV involvement in the murder of nine Colombians in Venezuela on October 24 (ref A), and fear that Chavez has yet to retaliate fully for the October 30 signing of the U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). The GOC has sounded alarms in response to Venezuela's recent arms purchases, but others in the region have remained silent. Chavez has blocked imports from Colombia, leading to border area confrontations and unrest. Bilateral trade, once thought to be of sufficient volume to prevent bilateral conflict, has fallen precipitously in the last several months, leaving local observers concerned that the constraints preventing conflict between the two states are dwindling. Despite these incidents, we see no evidence that either side is actively preparing for hostilities. However, as tensions along the border rise and perceptions skew, there is a small risk that a local incident could spiral out of control. End Summary.

GOC REQUESTS PRUDENT REACTIONS TO KILLINGS

¶2. (U) The GOC continues to react calmly to what it perceives as increasingly hostile rhetoric and actions from Venezuela in the wake of high-profile killings along the two countries' border. According to Colombian and Venezuelan press, the GBRV blames Colombian "paramilitaries" for the November 3 killing of two Venezuelan National Guard (GNV) members near the Colombian border and for the deaths of nine Colombians (along with one Peruvian and

one Venezuelan) whose bodies were discovered on October 24 in the Venezuelan border state of Tachira (ref A). The sole suspect in custody for the November 3 murders is a Venezuelan citizen, but GBRV officials assert he acted in concert with Colombian collaborators, according to press. Venezuelan Vice President Ramon Carrizalez declared the killings part of a joint USG-GOC plot to destabilize Venezuela.

¶3. (U) Carrizalez characterized the murders as the "spearhead" of the plot, which he linked to the recently signed U.S.-Colombia Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). GBRV Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami and Foreign Minister Nicolas Maduro claim to have arrested Colombian Administrative Department of Security (DAS) agents operating in Venezuela, and they say they have classified DAS documents proving the GOC sought to infiltrate and undermine Venezuela along with other neighboring countries. President Chavez told the press he was considering closing the Colombian border and declaring a state of emergency in response to the GNV killings but that he had not done so. (NOTE: Despite Chavez's denial that he had closed the border, Colombian press reported the major crossings in Norte de Santander were closed on November 3 and that Colombians were not being permitted to enter Venezuela at those crossings on November 4).

¶4. (C/NF) President Uribe and Foreign Minister Bermudez appealed

for calm on November 4 and asked the GBRV to investigate the deaths "without prejudgment." An MFA statement insisted the judicial process should operate without political interference, and it reiterated the GOC's offer to assist the Venezuelan investigation into the deaths. For his part, DAS director Felipe Munoz denies the alleged DAS agents ever worked for his agency and said the Colombian intelligence documents discussed by El Aissami and Maduro refer to defensive counterintelligence operations inside Colombian territory. (NOTE: In a separate case, a DAS official who travelled to Venezuela under unknown circumstances has been in GBRV custody for over a month. GOC officials claim he was not on DAS business and that they have been denied access to him.) The GOC so far appears to be following the moderate script that Ambassador Carlos Morales, MFA Acting Director for Latin America and the Caribbean, described to us in late October (ref A).

BILATERAL TRADE TAKES DRAMATIC HIT

¶5. (U) Still, the economic fallout that GOC officials and Colombian industry actors worried about in July (ref B) appears to be happening. Colombian exports to Venezuela, which had shown remarkable resilience during the first half of 2009, have taken a huge hit since Chavez' July 28 decision to "freeze" diplomatic relations with Colombia. September exports to Venezuela dropped by 52 percent, compared with September 2008 numbers. For the first half of October, Colombian exports were down 77 percent compared to the same period in 2008. Colombian imports from Venezuela are down 56 percent for the first nine months of 2009. Given the high degree of interdependence in border areas, such as Cucuta, trade restrictions and temporary border closings take a tremendous toll on the border region and have led to confrontations. Colombian newspapers prominently ran a photo showing Colombians climbing makeshift ladders to a bridge entering Venezuela.

¶6. (SBU) Venezuela's verbal announcement in mid-October that it would issue no sanitary or phytosanitary certificates to agricultural imports coming from Colombia has been subject to very broad interpretation, according to Colombian exporters, who report that even finished furniture coming from Colombia has been turned around at the border because the wood could be considered an agricultural product. Colombia filed a complaint with the WTO at

the end of October over the measures on agricultural products, which comprise 20 percent of Colombia's exports to Venezuela. The Trade Ministry's Director of Economic Integration Alfredo Ramos said he expects more WTO cases against Venezuela to follow, if for no other reason than to elevate the international profile of Venezuela's trade-related actions. Ramos added that Colombian retaliation made little sense, given how heavily bilateral trade favors Colombia; he expected 2009 to end with \$4 billion in Colombian exports to Venezuela (down 33 percent from 2008) compared to \$500 million in Venezuelan exports to Colombia (down 58 percent from 2008).

HEIGHTENED POSSIBILITY OF MISCALCULATION

¶7. (C/NF) Despite the GOC's measured reactions thus far, fears abound that the war of words could escalate into a more dangerous conflict. A lengthy piece in leading newsweekly "Semana" noted the GBRV had waited until the signing of the DCA to reveal the alleged DAS agents and the supposed USG-GOC plot, and argued Venezuela was using the claims to try to paint Colombia as a threat to its neighbors in order to isolate it regionally. The MFA's Morales agreed, saying the GOC is worried that no other Latin American country seems willing to buck Chavez, which he said would embolden the GBRV to continue its verbal barrage. The GOC is very concerned, he added, that Venezuelan arms purchases from outside

the region give Chavez more ability than in the past to back up his rhetoric.

¶8. (C/NF) Neither country appears to be actively preparing for a conflict, but the increasing bilateral mistrust and suspicion has a very broad spectrum of Colombians worried. Few local observers believe Chavez is actively preparing to invade Colombia, but they worry he is playing a dangerous game of stoking bilateral tensions to distract from his domestic political concerns. At the same time, Morales contends the GBRV's tolerance of illegal Colombian armed groups in its territory ensures a continued high potential for violence along the border, while the decreased economic links, increased Colombian isolation, and lack of GOC-GBRV communication channels suggest fewer factors exist to prevent localized incidents or an overreaction from border guards from spiraling into a larger conflict.

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